

Cracks in the Mirror: Idolatry in Celebrity Culture

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This essay provides a Qur’anic framework that explains the psychopathological tendency of idolising celebrities and icons. It argues that the adoration of such pseudo-characters is manifestation of man's inability to not worship and that this inbuilt drive must be directed to the One who is worthy of our love and submission.

The Qur’an informs its readers that man can exhibit a destructive psychopathological tendency of seeking temporary comfort and validation in pseudo-characters and icons, the pursuit of which symbolises an illusory closeness and affinity with those who come to represent them. This article considers the social malaise of an oftentimes over-adoration of society’s pseudo-characters, explaining the social phenomenon through a Qur’anic framework. Much of the described phenomenon is predicated on an image-based culture in which symbolic codes of happiness, of wealth and success are emblematically tied to an existential question of purpose and being; the ontological bearing permeates and taps into many areas and even functions of life. Singular successes and losses experienced by the pseudo-character permeate into cultural displays saturated by media consumption and any closeness in wealth and status between celebrity and its seeker takes form in the ephemeral and illusory.

The term ‘celebrity’ comes from the Latin adjective ‘celebrer’, meaning ‘being famous’. The term can thus relate to anyone who is admired and famous for something. Shakespeare wrote that some people are born great, some achieve greatness and others have greatness thrust upon them.¹ What is unique in this time, as American journalist and historian Neal Gabler explains, is that one would only need to pay a publicist to make oneself look great. “No society”, he writes, “has ever had as many celebrities as ours or has revered them as intensely. Not only are celebrities the protagonists of our news, the subjects of our daily discourse and the repositories of our values, but they have also embedded themselves so deeply in our consciousness that many individuals profess feeling closer to, and more passionate about, them than about their own primary relationships.”² Celebrity status is built on the refining and promoting of image – a carefully-concocted idea about a person that he or she is something special and elevated. The image is relayed to a world in search of something bigger than itself and the celebrity comes to take centre stage. Celebrities become objects of extreme devotion. American Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges describes the inflated culture of celebrity and its pervasive appeal as one reminiscent of emperor worship:

“Our culture builds temples to celebrities the way Romans did for divine emperors, ancestors, and household gods. We are a de facto polytheistic society...In celebrity culture, the object is to get as

close as possible to the celebrity. Relics of celebrities are coveted as magical talismans. Those who can touch the celebrity or own a relic of the celebrity hope for a transference of celebrity power. They hope for magic.”³

The Qur’an reminds us that instead of satisfaction and peace such devotion instead results in isolation and emptiness, isolation from God and isolation from oneself: “O you who believe, do not be like those who forgot Allah and so forgot themselves”.⁴ The truth of God’s existence and the fact that He is worthy of our worship is already known through one’s innate disposition (fiṭrah) or is discovered due to the fiṭrah’s affinity for the truth. However, the fiṭrah can be clouded by socialisation and other external influences, and the role of our lives therefore is to ‘remind’ us of the truth that we already knew or to discover the truth that is inline with our innate nature.

To illustrate this point, imagine I am cleaning my mother’s loft. As I move old bags around and throw away unwanted objects, I find my favourite toy that I used to play with when I was five years old. I am reminded of something that I already have knowledge of. In my mind I think: “Oh yeah. I remember this toy. It was my favourite.” The truth of believing in God and the fact that He is worthy of our worship is no different. Rational arguments serve as spiritual and intellectual awakenings to realise the knowledge that is contained in our fiṭrah. Other ways the fiṭrah can be unclouded include introspection, reflection, spiritual experiences, as well as negative circumstances we face in our lives. These ‘ways’ are mentioned in the Qur’an. For example, the Divine book promotes questioning and thinking deeply about such things, and these help to uncloud the fiṭrah:

“Thus do We explain in detail the signs for who give thought.”⁵

“Indeed in that is a sign for a people who give thought.”⁶

“Or were they created by nothing? Or were they the creators [of themselves]? Or did they create the heavens and the Earth? Rather, they are not certain.”⁷

The Qur’an also alludes to the fact that negative circumstances awakening within people the knowledge contained in their fiṭrah, the fact that God is a reality and deserves worship:

“And when waves come over them like canopies, they supplicate God, sincere to Him in religion.”⁸

In Islam worship entails knowing God, loving Him, obeying Him and directing all aspects of worship to Him alone. From this a universal logic can be derived – that the object of worship is the thing you want to know the most, the thing you love the most and obey, and the thing that you direct acts of worship (like gratitude) towards the most. The great Muslim theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya explained it succinctly thus: “Whoever knows his Lord, loves Him.”⁹

This logic can be applied to a fanboy or girl who adores their singer idol. They want to know them the most as indicated by the buying of magazines, following on social media, etc. Also they love them, as they express the language of love by words of affirmation, wanting to spend time with the idol (even if it’s online watching or listening), etc. They also obey the idol. If the idol said “spinach

is good for you” and started posting images of him or her eating the green leaf, they would buy spinach (this is why some are called influencers). Also, they express acts of worship like gratitude to them by affirming that their existence is what gives them some meaning in their lives.

This echoes what the Qur’an says: “God puts forward this illustration: can a man who has for his masters several partners at odds with each other be considered equal to a man devoted wholly to one master? All praise belongs to God, though most of them do not know.”¹⁰

What this is essentially telling us is that if we do not worship God, we end up worshipping something else. Martin Lings explains “man cannot not worship; and if his outlook is cut off from the spiritual plane, he will find a God to worship at some lower level, thus endowing something relative with what belongs only to the Absolute.”¹¹ These things enslave us and they become our masters. The Qur’anic analogy is teaching us that without God, we have many ‘masters’ and they all want something from us. They are all ‘at odds with each other’, and we end up in a state of misery, confusion and unhappiness. However, God, who knows everything, including our own selves, and who has more mercy than anyone else, is telling us that He is our master, and that only by worshipping Him alone will we truly free ourselves from the shackles of the things we have taken as unworthy replacements. The Qur’an explains that:

“But as for him who shall turn away from remembering Me – his shall be a life of narrow scope.”¹²

It is in the state of wilful distraction from devotion to the Creator and Sustainer to the extreme adulation of others that humans enter into what the Qur’an describes as *ghafla* – a desirous heedlessness, a preoccupation and diversion with the superficial at the expense of what is more pressing and what will further bear more significantly in the attaining of innermost satisfaction. Man’s betrayal here is one that is self-based, in that it relates to his innate disposition – that there is a form of knowledge in this God-created nature which includes acknowledgement of Him and the fact that He is worthy of our adoration. This however becomes clouded and man’s affinity for this truth becomes dormant.

We live, writes Gabler, in the “Kleenex age of fame”; celebrity culture produces and reproduces, stages and heralds and then casts away. An insatiable public appetite for sensation and spectacle, and one that is immediate reflects a caving for the instantaneous and unpredictable. The objects from whom they seek such cravings are not always able to fulfil and nor always required, but instead thrown away like tissue paper – as in Gabler’s metaphor. The celebrity in this light is a pseudo-personality and the mediated events constructed around them become pseudo-events.¹³ Stories of celebrities recycle themselves in myriad forms in an endless flow of text and visual media coverage and these have an inexorable effect on moulding the identity of audience and celebrity.¹⁴ The spectacle of image is what gives the celebrity oxygen and both are interdependent on one another.

Emperors of ancient times, often deified, were keen on asserting their importance through dazzling spectacle and display wrought together as elaborate testimony of their special place and privilege. Subjects who could find no real way into such sacred spaces attempted to do so through closeness with the emperor. That closeness was crucial in validating the subject’s own importance amongst his or her peers. Further still, to own a part of an item once having belonged to the emperor could accentuate a transference of divine status. In today’s hyper culture of celebrity, a stretching of a

hand towards the celebrity positions the seeker in globalised and virtual time and place. That he or she was there. To be afforded a touch or to own an item a celebrity once owned or even once touched is precisely that transference of celebrity status.

Celebrities capture consumers' attention and imagination through performances and details of their private lives, thus becoming an important component of social culture.¹⁵ This is perhaps most prevalent in Japanese social culture in which Japanese celebrities appear in nearly every TV and print ad, and advertise various products. Such celebrities are pop stars, reality TV stars, athletes, movie stars and others. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin describe the surreal full-blown national hysteria over the Japanese girl band AKB48 and what it says of the culture of the "power of "idols," a word used in Japan to refer to highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities. Idols can be male or female, and tend to be young, or present themselves as such; they appeal to various demographics, and often broad cross sections of society. Idols perform across genres and interconnected media platforms at the same time."¹⁶ The inspiration behind AKB48 was to form a girl group which could perform daily so fans can always see them live. Galbraith and Karlin describes the national mania of 'the idol project':

"On 9 June 2011, news of nuclear contamination in earthquake-stricken Japan took a backseat to the AKB48 General Election in the mass media. The third election of its kind for the all-girl idol group formed in 2005, it was a massive promotion and marketing blitz. In addition to fan-club members, anyone who had purchased their 21st single, "Everyday, Kachusha," could vote. In a week, it sold 1,334,000 copies, a new record for a single sold in Japan. The results of the General Election were announced during a live ceremony at the Budokan, where some of the most famous musical acts in the world have performed. The ceremony was also streamed live to 86 theaters (97 screens) in Japan, everywhere from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, and in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea (Barks Global Media 2011a). Fans were desperate for a seat— be it at the actual venue or the theaters— but tickets sold out almost instantly. This was more than just fanaticism. It was a media event and a public spectacle.¹⁷

Akio Nakamori explains how the 'idol' phenomenon in Japan, which began in the 1970s, has grown astonishingly and that the Japanese nation is in fact ruled by the principles of idolatry wherein its most important cultural products are idols.¹⁸ The crux of such a culture of idolatry is predicated on mass consumerism, on hypercapitalism. The consumer is positioned as a fan and the idol represents an objectified fantasy. Galbraith and Karlin outline that such media sensationalised stars are not required to be greatly talented but are very much part of the 'Kleenex age of fame' – interchangeable and disposable commodities; "idols are produced and packaged to maximize consumption."¹⁹

It is in the objectification of celebrities and celebrity icons that propel them into a world of idolisation. Audiences consume "the image and fame of celebrities through weekly celebrity magazines and introjection of celebrity values that has become aligned to their individual self."²⁰ What makes the modern-day celebrity so compelling yet unreachable is the hyper-emblazoned spectacle around the person, together with the myriad of jobs and functions he or she performs. It is of course the media consumption of audiences that generates such fascinations. Social media for example is replete with images of celebrities with thousands of comments from the public entertaining questions about their clothing, shades of lipstick they are wearing or what type of false lash extensions they have in the picture. Further still, the popularity of juicing, cleanses, detox diets, beauty and anti-aging products and practices can be linked directly to celebrity endorsements.²¹ Audiences give power to celebrities through such displays of adoration and the

acceptance of totem-like symbols that each celebrity represents and symbolises, and these, manufactured for public consumption at many levels of culture and economy. Such totems become unmistakeable and influence the way young people come to view of themselves. Nazi Parveen explains that the media allure of celebrity imaging has a damaging effect on young people's mental health who are exposed to an 'unobtainable' body image in the online world. She shows that 58% of 11 to 16-year-olds identified celebrity culture as the main influence.^[22] Boorstin explains that "Images are the pseudo-events of the ethical world. They are at best only pseudo-ideals. They are created and disseminated in order to be reported, to make a "favourable impression." Not because they are good, but because they are interesting. We suffer unwittingly from our idolatry. The more images we present to people, the more irrelevant and perverse and unattractive they find us."²³

Islam places sympathetic realism – fame and achievement – in the context of God's divine grace. The Qur'an stresses on man's utter dependence on God-given provisions which come to facilitate his functionality. That existence itself introduces us to the wonders of life, beyond the possibility of enumeration, is the starting point. Every moment of existence is a breath-taking experience of sensory perception, of conscience, of simultaneous working of mind, heart, body and soul. All together. To recognise a blessing is to first pay tribute to the inspiration which produced the recognition, and every single day at every single moment such overwhelming gratitude need be felt.

It is normal, even desirable to praise people due to their sporting skill, eloquence, strength or any other attribute. We do so even though they do not benefit us in any direct way. Similarly, God deserves extensive praise by virtue of His perfect names and attributes, and not as a result of how He decided to manifest them in our lives. If we can praise people who have limited and flawed attributes, what does it mean about how we must praise God whose names and attributes have no deficiency or flaw? We further note that the talents and skill in any individual stem from a successive flow of happenings and abilities inasmuch as God sustains the individual through health, mind and life. Ibn Qayyim explains this well:

"If a person contemplates on every perfection in existence he will notice it being an indication of divine perfection, and the indication of the perfection of His creativity. This is similar to the way that every knowledge in existence is a reflection of divine knowledge, and every power a reflection of His divine power."²⁴

The Qur'an sheds light on an individual who, though gifted with great wealth, succumbed to a delusory state of self-indulgent vanity. His community, reminding him of the divine presence and favour which made possible his riches, was ignored:

"Seek the life to come by means of what God has granted you, but do not neglect your rightful share in this world. Do good to others as God has done good to you. Do not seek to spread corruption in the land, for God does not love those who do this."²⁵

"but he answered, 'This wealth was given to me on account of the knowledge I possess.' Did he not know that God had destroyed many generations before him, who had greater power than him and built up greater wealth?"²⁶

What the pseudo-personality of Qārūn, described in the above verses, did was project a self-image

of importance. The Qur'an describes that he did this through both a verbalised declaration and an actualised strutting before his people and in so doing captivated some of his audience who longed to be like him. For an instance that distance between spectator and spectated was marginalised as they too sought to stretch out their hands.

“He went out among his people in all his pomp, and those whose aim was the life of this world said, ‘If only we had been given something like what Qarun has been given: he really is a very fortunate man,’”²⁷

The Qur'an describes that there are some “who take others as rivals with Allah, loving them as they should love Allah”.²⁸ Such a fascination with the ‘image’ stems from man’s tendency to adore and adulate what appears larger, more-than, and almost unattainable. Al-Ṭabarī explains the verse as suggestive of unbelievers in their worship of idols, and the false gods of polytheists worshipped alongside Allah. He also explains that it refers to the leaders of such unbelievers who were obeyed in disobedience to Allah.”²⁹ Al-Qurṭubī highlights how such pseudo-personalities become objects of worship, love, reverence and obedience.³⁰ There is no intimation from them that they share with God in creating and providing for His creation but in their excessiveness of reverence they took them as partners with Allah. Al-Baghawī explains that “they love idols as they love God because they shared them with God, so they equated God with their idols in love.”³¹

The Qur'an reminds us that an idol is someone or something that occupies the place of God in your life. God is He to whom one turns with love, hope, trust and from whom purpose and values are understood. The false idols of celebrity, of social position, of self-aggrandizement, of wealth, take the place of God in one’s life and provide man a false sense of identity, meaning, value, purpose, love, significance and security. Allah reminds us, “Weak is both the seeker and the sought after.”³² The Qur'an informs us that man can be thoughtlessly side-tracked in paying homage to displays of achievement and spectacle and altogether fall short in recognition of the wondrous happenings around him, each of which call attention to the marvel of God’s Majesty. God calls on us to consider:

“[And] is there any, besides the Most Gracious, that could be a shield for you, and could succour you [against danger]? They who deny this truth are but lost in self- delusion!”³³

“Who can provide for you if He withholds His provision? Yet they persist in their insolence and their avoidance of the Truth.”³⁴

“Who is it that answers the distressed when they call upon Him? Who removes their suffering? Who makes you successors in the earth? Is it another god beside God? Little notice you take!”³⁵

“Who is it that guides you through the darkness on land and sea? Who sends the winds as heralds of good news before His mercy? Is it another god beside God? God is far above the partners they put beside him!”³⁶

“Who is it that made the earth a stable place to live? Who made rivers flow through it? Who set immovable mountains on it and created a barrier between the fresh and salt water? Is it another god

beside God? No! But most of them do not know.”³⁷

“Who created the heavens and earth? Who sends down water from the sky for you- with which We cause gardens of delight to grow: you have no power to make the trees grow in them- is it another god beside God? No! But they are people who take others to be equal with God.”³⁸

Who is it that creates life and reproduces it? Who is it that gives you provision from the heavens and earth? Is it another god beside God?’ Say, ‘Show me your evidence then, if what you say is true.’³⁹

Chris Hedges comments on the way illusion often replaces reality in our world. He writes: “We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so “realistic” that they can live in them. We are the most illusioned people on earth. Yet we dare not become disillusioned, because our illusions are the very house in which they live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience.”⁴⁰ In a remarkable testament to the veracity and integrity in the Prophet Muhammad’s character he was once approached by a Makkan individual who shuddered in awe when he gazed upon the Prophet. It was not a moment of egocentric privilege that emerged from the encounter but instead a profound display of humility and a displacing of ‘image’ with a call to ideals. The Prophet, though spectacular in his beauty, on seeing the man overcome instructed him instead: “Relax, for I am not a king. I am the son of a woman from Quraysh who used to eat dried meat”.⁴¹ The moment was poignant and demonstrative in its offsetting of a culture of self-aggrandisement. Prophets of course far exceed the worth of temporal rulers like kings but the Prophet used the occasion to demonstrate something transformative in his message of calling his people to the worship of the One God. Though people will continually and rightfully be in awe at both the image and ideals, person and persona of the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur’an calls on the faithful to be in uttermost awe at the Supreme Being who sent him.

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